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Mansion house committee on the unemployed

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[1904?]

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Mansion House Committee on the Unemployed.

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ABSTRACT OF THE REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.

1903-4.

THE Mansion House Committee, which had been dormant since 1895, was revived last winter in view of the threatened approach of exceptional want of employment, and adopted a new method of dealing with the distress. The scheme originated with the Bishop of Stepney, Canon Barnett, and other East End workers. Only people with established homes were to be considered. Male heads of families were to be offered work in the country, and were to be maintained there, while substantial relief was to be paid direct to their families at home.

The advantages claimed for this scheme of "colony" relief works were, firstly, that relief sufficient for the needs of the family to selected cases throughout the period of depression was the most profitable way of expending relief money; secondly, that continuous work under proper supervision was the best way to secure the selection of men worth helping adequately; and thirdly, that temporary migration to the country not only ensured the continuity of the work and supervision, but also afforded a simple means of making the relief work different from ordinary employment, an end usually sought by a reduction of the hours or the pay.

To avoid the prohibitive cost of creating fresh colonies for the purpose, arrangements were made with Hadleigh Farm Colony and Osea Island for the employment and maintenance of the men. The Lord Mayor's appeal brought in about £4,000, and the relief works were kept open from Dec. 17th, 1903, to Mar. 24th, 1904. During this period 467 men, representing families containing 2,456 persons in all, were employed. Each man accepted had the chance of staying on the works to the close—an offer varying from 14 weeks for the earliest parties, to 4 weeks for the latest. Some men left after a few days, but a great many stayed to the end, and the average time spent on the works was $5\frac{1}{2}$ weeks. The maximum number employed at any one time was 306. The weekly payments to the families came to about 14/- each, while the keep of the men averaged about 9/6 a week. 2,561 of these weekly payments were made. The total cost per family, including capital expenditure on the provision of accommodation and work, when the capacity of the colonies was exhausted, railway fares, and the loan

of boots for the rough country work, came to 30/6 per week. The relief to the families was therefore very thorough. They were maintained in efficiency and some degree of comfort throughout the winter, with a view to enabling them to regain their places in regular employment when the winter depression was over. This a large number of them succeeded in doing. Sixteen families, representing 78 persons, were emigrated to Canada at a cost to the Fund of £360. Most of these write cheerfully of their prospects. Only one complains of difficulty in finding work.

Apart from the number of families helped and the thoroughness of the assistance given, the colony scheme has thrown light on the problems of relief. From the outset the "country test" was successful in deterring the mass of idlers and dependents who usually crowd the offices of relief funds. But it was soon found that the accommodation at the works was in danger of being filled with casual labourers, to whom the comparatively high scale of diet and of relief proved too attractive. The presence of these men in large numbers kept the standard of work down to a low level, while very few of them were likely to derive permanent benefit. It was therefore decided to give a preference to men with good employers' references, who were likely to regain regular work if tided over the bad season. In all, 160 of the former class were taken, mostly from Stepney, and 307 of the latter, from the four Boroughs of Stepney, Poplar, Bethnal Green and Shoreditch. The comparison of their occupations and of their conduct on the colonies is instructive. Of the 160, 119 were labourers, mostly general and waterside; of the 307, 132 were labourers, chiefly of higher grades; while 67 other occupations were represented—cabinet makers, painters, and boot-makers reaching double figures. The second class represent in fact the higher grades of unskilled workmen, with a certain admixture of skilled trades. The difference in the records at the colonies is equally suggestive. Of the men without references 40% stayed to the end or left to go to work, while of those with references 77% did well. It must be remembered that to the latter class the conditions of life were relatively less attractive. On the other hand, since they went down later, their perseverance was not tested for so many weeks.

It was ascertained by enquiry late in the summer, that of the better class men who were known to have been in good employment down to the latter part of 1903 and who did well on the colonies, about one-third had regained regular work, one-third had only obtained casual jobs, and one-third were out of work all the summer. These figures confirm the *Labour Gazette* figures for trades unionists in pointing to a depression of trade which is more than seasonal and which seems to demand some thorough measures of relief if the efficiency of those who fall out of employment is to be preserved till trade revives.

The conclusions suggested to the Committee by their experiences are, briefly, that the colony scheme proved thoroughly successful in discovering and assisting a large number of genuine working men, and in getting good work done by them, and in weeding out the loafers by the continuity of the work and supervision. Classification, by means of enquiry into industrial record, proved to be necessary to secure a class for whom the colony should not be too attractive, and who would be likely to receive permanent benefit. The labour test greatly shortened the enquiry, and the selection of the better class of workmen reduced the cost by the avoidance of bad work and of waste upon undesirable cases.

Finally, the continuous work in the country not only maintained the health and efficiency of the men, but formed a most useful means of testing and of training those who needed permanent assistance in the way of emigration or change of trade. The thoroughness of the test and the selection of the men usually in regular work avoided most of the dangers to which relief works, especially if repeated, are liable, of sapping the independence of those who are helped.

The Committee close their report with the reflection that in spite of the limitations caused by the smallness of the Fund, a large number of genuine unemployed families were thoroughly helped, the men were maintained in health, efficiency, and self-respect, their homes kept together, and their wives and children enabled to preserve a fair standard of comfort through the winter. This was done without attracting to the Fund the habitually dependent, and at a cost which must be regarded as small in proportion to the thoroughness of the relief afforded.

Full particulars of the working of the scheme, the diet, accommodation, effect of the test, quantity and quality of work done, and effect on the men and their families, are contained in the Report, and the Statistical Tables appended. Copies can be obtained on application at the Mansion House.

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